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Farm usage might go up **Nationally, farmers eyeing higher commodity prices** *ROBYN L. MINOR, The Daily News, rminor@bgdailynews.com*

With commodity prices at an all-time high, there is some concern nationally that land in Conservation Reserve Programs will be put back into production.

Some farmers even are opting to cancel their contracts and pay a penalty, but that doesn't appear to be the case locally, according to Ruth Steff-Pike, resource and conservation development coordinator for the Natural Resources and Conservation Service.

But there are farmers in Kentucky whose 10- or 20-year contracts (the time they agree to keep land out, planted in cover grasses and out of production in exchange for payments) are nearing their end who are considering putting acreage back into production, she said.

"Most farmers really want to farm and right now they see a bright future," Steff-Pike said. "The problem is that the price is really good but inputs are really high."

Corn is more than \$8 a bushel (up from \$2 or so a few years ago) but that is offset by such costs as fertilizer that has gone from \$220 to \$800 ton over the last year, she said.

"But if grain prices continue to rise, I imagine we will see some contracts ending," she said.

The Progressive Farmer magazine this month quoted a Cadiz farmer saying he is planning on withdrawing some acreage even before the contracts expire. The magazine estimated that 2.5 million acres nationally may exit the program.

The prospect has Sen. Joey Pendleton, R-Hopkinsville, worried. Pendleton, who also is a farmer, represents the farming counties of Christian, Logan and Todd and sits on **agriculture**-related committees.

"I'm afraid we are going to back the way it was and start planting from fence row to fence row and we will be planting ground not suited for it – ground that should be used for livestock and wildlife," he said.

Pendleton said he is seeing more land come out of the conservation program in Christian County but a lot of it is being put in dark-fired tobacco, not row crops.

Dark-fired is used to make snuff, a popular product, and much of it is exported.

"You'd be surprised at the number of (tobacco) barns being built in Christian County in the last 12 months," Pendleton said.

Despite Kentucky's efforts to diversify, tobacco is a crop that always will be around. But Pendleton said what scares him is the number of younger farmers with no knowledge of the crop getting into it.

"We have this one boy raising 100 acres and he has never done it before," he said. "I raised ... it and it's not only hard work but you need to know exactly what you are doing to get the right finish. You have to live in those barns."

If the land that comes out was put into the program before 2002, the impacts to wildlife won't be that great since most of it is sowed in fescue, according to John Morgan, small game program coordinator for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife.

But land put into the program after 2002 had to be planted in native grasses, something which is beneficial for Kentucky songbirds, deer, turkey and other wildlife, he said.

If some of the early contract land goes back into production, there might actually be a benefit if farmers use 30 feet to 150 feet barriers at the edge of their croplands. Those barriers could provide refuge for wildlife, Morgan said.

But that's a big if, since farmers want to get the most production from their acreage, he said.

The department would be concerned if native grasslands were put back into production since they were planted with taxpayer dollars.

"And the program is not just a benefit to wildlife but aimed at improving water quality and reducing soil erosion," he said. "There were some rumors that the administration was considering letting people out of their contracts without penalties and we certainly don't support that."

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